



Complex Trauma

Block 12 Sexual Assault Response Coordinator Training



Continuum of Severity

- Anything in the trauma, the person or the context that:
 - makes the emotions more intense
 - makes the meanings more confusing or upsetting
 - will make the trauma more severe or “complex”



Complex Trauma

- Complex trauma is the term we use for:
 - Situations that are relatively more psychologically complicated and toxic
 - The psychological adaptations people must make to cope with these toxic situations



Why Look At Complex Trauma?

- Complex trauma is associated with a more confusing array of responses
- Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is often a complex trauma
- Understanding complex trauma sheds light on confusing behaviors



**There is a pain - so utter -
It swallows substance up -
Then covers the Abyss with Trance -
So Memory can step
Around - across - upon it -
As one within a Swoon -
Goes safely - where an open eye -
Would drop Him - Bone by Bone.**

-Emily Dickinson



What makes trauma 'worse'?

- Interpersonal
- Age (early or late in development)
- Repetition
- Violence (subjective life threat)



Interpersonal Trauma

- We are social creatures
 - We depend on each other
 - Language development, sense of self
 - Regulating emotions, interpreting experience
- Interdependency requires trust
- Interpersonal trauma violates that trust
- Studies show that survivors of interpersonal trauma suffer more injury than survivors of natural disasters



I am still as I am before. I am still studying, studying hard for my future. I am not sad all the time because the disaster came from God.



Two years after the flood Buffalo Creek was almost as desolate as it had been the day following - the grief as intense, the fear as strong...the despair as dark. People looked out at the world with vacant eyes and drifted from one place to another with dulled and tentative movements. They rarely smiled and rarely played. They were not sure how to relate to each other. They were unsettled and deeply hurt.



Early in Development

- Impressionable, permeable, malleable
- In a highly formative stage
 - Development is scaffolded
 - each life phase builds upon the previous one
- Dependent
 - Often upon the abuser







Childhood Trauma

- Most children are injured within their family
 - trapped
 - dependent upon their abuser
- Abuser's control is absolute
 - (doesn't have to be overt)
- Being loved and being harmed become conflated



Entrapment Creates

- An ongoing traumatic situation
 - Repeated exposure to trauma
- An inability to get safe
- Intense, chronic helplessness, terror, and dread
 - Unrelenting physiological arousal
- Dependency upon the perpetrator
 - Increased risk of internalizing the perpetrators views
- The necessity of not knowing what you know
 - Intolerable meanings
 - Dissociation is inevitable



It was really cyclical actually...and the odd thing was that in the good periods I could hardly remember the bad times. It was almost as if I was leading two different lives“



**So much to do today:
kill memory, kill pain,
turn heart into stone,
and yet prepare to live again.**

The Sentence, Akhmatova, 1939, In "Against Forgetting", Ed.
Forche, 1993



Childhood Trauma is Common

- Landmark study: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study
- 18,000 middle class, middle aged members of an HMO
 - 11% emotionally abused
 - 28% physically abused
 - 24% sexually abused
 - 27% grew up in households where there was alcohol and/or drug abuse
 - 19% grew up with a mentally ill or institutionalized member
 - 13% grew up in households with a battered mother
- 52% had experienced more than one ACE
- 12% had experienced four or more ACEs



Effects Are Pervasive and Enduring

- The effects of childhood trauma are
 - Varied
 - Powerful
 - Far reaching
 - Enduring
- The greater the exposure to trauma, the greater the harm



The Scaffolding Effect

- Exposure to trauma →
- Effects neurodevelopment →
- Effects emotional, cognitive and biological processing of subsequent experience→
- Shapes behavior



Military Sexual Trauma is Complex

- Perpetrators are usually known to the victim
- Victims are typically young
- The military is like a family
- The military is hierarchical and authoritarian
- Military culture places a premium on strength, self sufficiency and loyalty
- Victims are in conditions of relative entrapment (restricted freedom of movement)
- Re-exposure and re-victimization are likely



Complex Trauma and Confusing Behaviors

- Understanding complex trauma sheds light on confusing behaviors
- Understanding promotes a more accurate, respectful, non-judgmental approach
 - (Understanding does not imply endorsement)



Confusing Behaviors

- Acting like it didn't happen
- Not getting help when possible
- Insufficient self-protection
- Misplaced self-protection
- Pronounced problems remembering accurately
- Drinking, drugging
- History of promiscuity either before or after the rape
- Provocative dress and behavior



What Underlies Confusing Behaviors

- Appeasement
- Desire for control
- Trying to cope with intolerable emotions
- Negative schemas about the self
- Efforts to maintain psychological balance
- Dissociation
- Mistrust
- Misdirected vigilance



In The Aftermath of Complex Trauma

- Positive resolution is more elusive and difficult
- Traumatic emotions and traumatically shaped schemas persist
- Coping strategies endure, often unchanged
- There is an ongoing struggle to maintain psychological balance



In The Aftermath of Complex Trauma

What decreases psychological suffering may well increase physical harm



Our Understanding of Complex Trauma

- Shapes the responses we have and the actions we take on behalf of victims
- *Presume an adaptational effort*



Adverse Childhood Events Study

- The Adverse Childhood Events Study examined long-term emotional, behavioral and physical consequences of adverse childhood events (ACEs)
- 18,000 mostly middle aged and middle class members of an HMO
- Three major categories of recurrent abuse
 - Emotional, Physical, and Sexual
- Five categories of household difficulty
 - Household member drug or alcohol abuser
 - Battered mother
 - Severely mentally ill family member
 - Death of a parent
 - Household member in prison



The Reach of Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Individuals with more ACEs were more likely to
 - Have serious physical health problems
 - Smoke, be severely obese
 - Be depressed, have made suicide attempts
 - Have problems with alcohol, illicit drugs
 - Have had more than 50 sexual partners, have a history of STDs
- Other studies confirmed these finding and found that individuals with more ACEs were more likely to
 - Have mental health problems
 - Have interpersonal and familial difficulties
 - Be sexually harassed and/or assaulted later in life
 - Commit rape and/or other criminal acts



Profound Effects Endure

- The magnitude of the effects is unparalleled in epidemiology
- For example,
 - People with an ACE score of 4 or more were 460% more likely to be suffering from depression
 - The increased suicide risk was 1,220% between the two groups and the gap widens as the ACEs increase
 - People with an ACE score of 4 versus 0 or more had a 240% increased risk of hepatitis
 - Males with an ACE of 6 had a 4,600% greater risk of becoming an IV drug user compared to a male child with an ACE of 0



Adverse childhood experiences are the main determinant of the health and social well-being of the nation. ... How does this happen, this reverse alchemy, turning the gold of a newborn infant into the lead of a depressed adult? The study makes it clear that time does not heal some of the adverse experiences we found so common in the childhoods of a large population of middle-ages, middle class Americans. One does not 'just get over' some things, not even fifty years later"

The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Health:
Turning gold into lead. Vincent J. Felitti, MD, 2003

<http://>

www.acestudy.org/docs/GoldintoLead.pdf



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